



Pakistani Ahmadi and Christian families seeking shelter in Thailand find solace in art and reading the Bible or Koran.

# SURVIVING on faith

PERSECUTED FOR THEIR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AT HOME, HOUNDED IN BANGKOK FOR OVERSTAYING THEIR WELCOME DESPITE BEING ASYLUM SEEKERS, AHMADI AND CHRISTIAN PAKISTANIS TURN TO DIVINE INSPIRATION TO LOOK FOR A WAY OUT

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THE INTENSITY of a young artist burns in the eyes of Anaya, an eight-year-old member of the Ahmadi sect, who, with her parents and six-year-old brother Adlai fled Pakistan when the dreadful security conditions they'd endured for years suddenly worsened.

The family's names have been changed for this story to protect them.

Radiating calm, Anaya shows her portfolio of sketches from a life spent mostly on the run. "This is me and my brother," she says, pointing to two anthropomorphic marshmallows wearing fine clothes and big smiles. With a look of wistful longing, she adds, "In the future I want to be a doctor." She draws inspiration for her drawings from the samosas her father often cooks.

"We left Pakistan for many reasons," her mother Neha explains. "But mostly we left because we are Ahmadi. We are different. Other Muslims don't accept us."

Although the Ahmadis consider themselves Muslim, in Pakistan they are often targeted under strict blasphemy laws. Since 1984, members of the community have been prohibited from describing themselves as Muslims or propagating their beliefs – under penalty of death or life imprisonment – despite their strict adherence to Islamic values.

The Ahmadis are named for Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, who formed an Islamic revivalist group in the late 1800s in Punjab, a region straddling the Indian-Pakistani border that was then part of the British Empire. Ahmadis claim to reinvigorate, not add to the core message of Islam, yet they often run afoul of hostile societal forces.

"The situation was so bad I had to leave Pakistan – anyone who belongs to Jammat Ahmadiya has no value in Pakistan," Neha says, using the formal name for the religious community into which she was born.

She still dreams of becoming an Islamic scholar, but was forced to terminate her studies at a Pakistan college because of persecution by mainstream Muslim classmates, who regu-

larly called her *kafir* (infidel).

She attended as many classes as she could before the abuse drove her away. For a while she only showed up for exams, but then this too became too difficult to endure.

Neha's well-behaved children have few memories of their homeland. "Overall the security situation in Pakistan is very bad. Bombings are common and there is no value given to life. We left in order to save ourselves," she explains. Her husband Elisha faced similar challenges as a factory worker making sports equipment.

He entered a mosque to pray during Ramadan a few years ago and a co-worker asked, "What are you doing here?" Relations deteriorated from there, and after he was assaulted, robbed of his money and bicycle and left tied to a tree, Elisha realised he could no longer keep the job and a wage that barely met his family's needs. The family felt compelled to flee to Thailand on tourist visas.

"We all pray to the same God," he says, hoping that one day the commonalities linking all who profess their faith in Allah will outweigh the differences – differences he says that are "just a matter of tradition."

## Promise of equality

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan acknowledges inequalities in modern society. He declared in his election victory speech last August, "Pakistan's policies won't be for the few rich people – they will be for the poor, for women and for minorities, whose rights are not respected."

The Muslim Mughals who colonised and converted great swathes of India often failed to extend to their subjects the religious rights that would one day be demanded as the British era faded.

"The Islamic conquest of India is probably the bloodiest story in history," writes Will Durant, as quoted on the website of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party.

The British Empire that replaced the Mughals committed a multitude of atrocities. When the British left India, Muslim leaders like Muhammad Ali Jinnah wanted the religious commu-



Pakistan PM Imran Khan, who has long championed Muhammad Ali Jinnah, once stated: "I want Pakistan to become the country that my leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah had dreamed of."

nity to run its own affairs. India's partition in 1947 resulted in a land divided – with mid-sized religious minorities in predominantly Hindu India and smaller ones in Pakistan.

Khan has long championed Jinnah, who in 1948 said, "We stand by our declarations that members of every community will be treated as citizens of Pakistan with equal rights and privileges and obligations and that minorities will be safeguarded and protected."

Just before his election victory, Khan stated, "I want Pakistan to become the country that Muhammad Ali Jinnah dreamed of."

It is a dream waiting to be realised. Overstaying tourist visas and being denied refugee status, perhaps with a stint or two in Bangkok's Immigration Detention Centre, is for many Pakistanis in Thailand considered a fate better than death.

Ahmadi and Christian Pakistanis have often escaped life-and-death moments at home with the help of Thailand's easily available tourist visas.

"The only problem in Thailand," says a Christian Pakistani who asked to be identified only as Adil, "is paying the rent."

He deeply misses his work as an ambulance medic and providing "basic life support" in Karachi.

Adil tells his story from an apartment he shares with compatriots who've been hiding out for about five years. A stack of well-worn bibles in

English and Urdu, among them a child's edition, helps pass the time, as does sewing, sketching scenes from daily life and cooking meals from ingredients purchased with food and rent donations from a Canadian charity.

Adil's extended family left behind a reliable source of income – collecting and recycling scrap metal and plastic – when gunmen showed up one day demanding 2.5 million rupees. "We didn't have that kind of money. Extortion is very common in Karachi. If you don't pay they will deliver an envelope filled with bullets. This is what happened to us."

Adil's father later received a call, in which his was told, "We did not kill today, but next time we will."

Adil quit his job as a medic and the family applied for Thai visas.

Once here, the UNHCR decided that Adil's father, not him, was most in danger, since it was his dad who had received the threats directly.

"I was the one who tallied the scrap-company accounts daily, but because mine was an informal role, I wasn't perceived as being threatened."

While UNHCR protection was extended to most of the 20 members of Adil's extended family living in Bangkok, including three sisters, uncles, aunts and cousins, Adil was left out of the arrangement. "We do not want to move on again until all of us are covered," he said.

In the interim there are grey areas.

A few months ago, police picked up Adil's uncle while he was on his way to Phuket, where a dishwashing job waited. "My aunt is depressed and losing weight. She has two young children to take care of. She makes food for him and tries to visit twice a week," Adil said.

The aunt receives food and basic aid from St Michael's Church and Caritas, a Catholic relief organisation. Her condition worsened when she too got caught in the Thai immigration dragnet and she and her children spent several weeks in the detention centre.

## Very little protection

"Many refugees arrive in Bangkok with only a passport and tourist visa," says Jennifer Harrison of UNHCR Thailand. "Once their visas expire, they are considered illegal aliens under the Immigration Act. Because Thailand has no domestic legislation governing refugees and is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, refugees and asylum seekers are considered illegal migrants and are therefore at risk of arrest and detention as soon as they do not have a valid visa."

"Since so many asylum seekers fear arrest, the consequences of their limited mobility can include reduced access to basic services, such as health or education, as well as associated risks of exploitation and abuse given their often 'illegal' status, in addition to stress and exacerbating medical conditions."

"Less than 1 per cent of the world's refugees are resettled each year and the number of places available continues to decline," Harrison says. "In Thailand, the UNHCR works to manage unrealistic expectations of resettlement through counselling sessions with all people of concern, including Pakistanis."

With transit nations like Thailand cracking down on migrants and resettlement countries in the West tightening borders, the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights – particularly the "right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution" – holds out less hope. Migrants nowadays are being dismissed simply as economic migrants, regardless of the horrors they've endured.

Adil finds it difficult to be optimistic about Pakistan's future.

"Christians do not have equal rights in Pakistan. Muslims in Pakistan use a beautiful weapon called the blasphemy law."

He finds it hard place any faith in Khan, referring to the premier's other statements that run counter to his expressed desire for inclusion and justice.

"The culture of extremism is strong in my homeland," says Adil, who in 2013 joined protests after an attack on a church in Peshawar killed many.

"There are several families living in my community in Thon Buri," says Adil. "They only go outside when necessary. In Thailand I'm living in constant fear of arrest. I feel like I've been tossed into a frying pan."

Less than 1 per cent of Pakistanis are Christians, while Ahmadis stand at about 2 per cent of the country's population of 200 million.

"Most of the Christians who are still in the country want to leave as well," says Adil.

"The only ones I know who want to remain are so-called Christians who've been co-opted by friends in the government and want to create a false impression of religious tolerance."

The most likely place of settlement for Adil's family is Canada. "We are looking for sponsorship from church, particularly in Canada. We want to live freely as Christians."

Meanwhile, older relatives have risked getting caught to pick up basic jobs around Bangkok, while younger ones, such as Adil's sisters, are attending classes at the Bangkok Refugee Centre, though getting there is becoming difficult due to increased vigilance against visa violators.

Adil, meanwhile, is only left with memories of a stable life and unshakable faith.

"One of my most meaningful experiences in Karachi was helping deliver a baby. It was a complicated procedure, but the happy outcome was very meaningful," he recounts.

"In these difficult moments I would always say a prayer. I miss serving the people of Pakistan. I hope I can return to the profession that makes me feel closest to God."